The Inculcative Power of Australian Cadet Corps Uniforms in the 1900s and 1910s

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Articles

The 1900s and 1910s were a prime era for the growth and empowerment of cadet corps within Australia. Private schools in particular sought to build on a newfound spirit of nationalism following the Federation of the colonies in 1901 by harnessing enthusiasm for the nation and British Empire, and by cultivating a martial culture among their predominantly middle-class students. The principal tool harnessed in that cultivation were the school cadet corps, and the most visible symbol of those corps were their uniforms. By focussing on the cadet corps in the private schools of Sydney during this era, this article will explore the

emphasis placed on cadet corps uniforms and argue that uniforms were *the central element* used cultivate a sense of identity and *esprit de corps*. When considered within the context of broader cadet corps activities, this will further demonstrate the power of uniforms as an instrument of cultural inculcation.

The Federation of Australia in 1901 ushered in a new environment of national defence anxiety amongst the new nation's middle-class citizens. The drive to Federation itself had partly been fuelled by colonial concerns regarding defence, and, in the new century, the newly federated states sought to work together to allay their combined concerns (White 114). But government policies were only one of the many ways the middle class were preparing the nation. Within the education system, middle-class private schools became a key instrument in preparing middle-class boys for their future as leaders of the nation in politics, business, and, of course, in the military. Within those schools, the cadet corps were utilised to instil core middle-class values of discipline, self-sacrifice, and responsibility in boys. As early as 1900, Sydney Grammar School authorities were proposing the resuscitation of their cadet corps following the rise in military spirit due to the Boer War (*The Sydneian* "Editorial", 1). The subsequent growth in both national and imperial defence-consciousness over the following years resulted in 100 boys forming a petition requesting the formation of a cadet corps in 1907 (*The Sydneian* "The Cadet Movement", 12). Within a year, the boys' request was granted. With this type of enthusiasm from boys, the cadet corps increased in strength throughout the private schools of Sydney during the 1900s. Where they had already existed, they now commanded greater prestige, and where a school previously had no cadet corps, one was soon formed. In 1911, Compulsory Military Training commenced in Australia for all youths aged between 12 and 26, with a view to creating a citizens' militia. Thus, militarism was a marked element in the new nation's first decade.

The changing nature of society during the 1900s also led to changing images of the ideal citizen, and understandably, of the 'ideal middle-class boy'. Martin Crotty argues that in the 1900s, Australian middle-class society stressed that 'fighting for one's country is the peak of personal achievement and the epitome of manliness' (9). Crotty goes on to examine the perceptions of middle-class manliness throughout the 1900s and 1910s, where masculinity was defined as the soldier serving his country, and the 'manliest' thing a person could do was to fight and die in war. Within this context, then, it is no surprise that private school boys welcomed the cadet system openly and were prepared to adhere to the discipline and the drill that went with it without a fuss. At St. Ignatius College, the school magazine *Our Alma Mater* reported in 1909 that 'with enthusiasm on the part of the Corps, and attention to details by the officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, the College will be in possession of a really fine corps of the future defenders of the Commonwealth'. Cadets were seen as a partial answer to middle-class fears about the defence of Australia. The cadets would provide strong, disciplined, and willing officers in an army if it was needed for the defence of country and empire. It would also make decent men of the boys, curing them of the slothful habits of modern youth. *The Newington* reported during the first year of Compulsory Military Training that

> in a year's time we shall see a great improvement in the appearance and physique of those who have never hitherto had any instruction in the art of bodily discipline and culture. The slouch and roll so much in vogue amongst a certain class of boys will have disappeared, we hope, and a manlier, firmer walk have taken their place. (December

1911, 171)

The Newington succinctly conveyed the hopes of all the private schools of Sydney, irrespective of denomination.

Much has been written about the history of the cadet corps within the Australian historical literature. Craig Stockings's *The Torch and the Sword* remains a seminal work in the field due to its broad focus on the general cadet movement in Australia. Beyond this, most scholarly works focus either on a specific cadet corps, specific location or region, specific theme, or on a specific period.[1] However, relatively scant attention has been paid to the importance of their uniforms, and when uniforms are mentioned, it is usually only briefly and in passing. Given the centrality of the uniform to the culture and identity of the cadet corps, this is a surprising gap in the scholarship that this article seeks to address.

The military uniform is 'a relatively recent phenomenon' (Tynan and Godson 10). While uniforms appear as far back as antiquity, their widespread adoption over the last couple of centuries is due to a convergence of social norms and technology. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the increasing numbers of public servants meant that more civilians were uniformed whilst performing their duties (Williams-Mitchell 61). Tynan and Godson argue that 'as state, society and nation converged towards the end of the nineteenth century uniform became part of a modern culture increasingly concerned with regulating time, space, and bodies' (Tynan and Godson 6). The development of a regular military occurred within this space and can be seen as of part of the development of the stable nation state (Hackett 61). Standardisation of dress for large professional armies was enabled by technological developments brought about by the industrial revolution. Mass production of apparel meant that uniforms could be quickly produced and at a lower cost. In addition, the social culture of the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras in the British Empire was reflected in the material culture of their uniforms. During the First World War, military uniforms tended to be influenced by civilian fashion, while during the Second World War 'a much more systematic approach to military uniforms could be seen' (Craik 49).

Uniforms have a psychological and social significance beyond identity. Uniforms legitimise the power of both the state and of the person wearing the uniform. The uniform seeks to overlay the image of the institution onto the person, obscuring the individual beneath. Uniforms have a power beyond just the outward appearance, they also affect us as individuals, shaping 'how we are and how we perform our identities' (Craik 4). This was recognised by utilitarian reformers at the turn of the twentieth century who 'saw in the military body an efficiency that could usefully be transposed to civil society' (Tynan and Godson 11), thereby shaping the populace's inner as well as their outer selves (Craik 4). Further uniforms are about appearance, maintaining high standards of dress and a sense of belonging (Williams-Mitchell 111). Uniforms are instrumental in the creation of an *esprit de corps* (Langner 126). Being in the military is seen as more than an occupation, it is a vocation (Hackett 9), and to don a uniform communicates one's sense of purpose. Part of this is achieved through the maintenance and correct wearing of the uniform, the discipline involved setting a moral high bar for others to measure themselves against.

The use of school uniforms, particularly within the private school system, had been established by the end of the nineteenth century. While the addition of a military uniform for

student cadets may at first seen incongruous, there are clear reasons why these uniforms would be appealing. Up to and during the First World War, British army officers were 'still the preserve of young men of good social standing' (Hackett 158), an association which no doubt appealed to schools whose remit was to prepare young men for leadership positions within society. Further, military uniforms were traditionally seen as an inherently *masculine* dress, with a 'close fit between the attributes of normative *masculinity* as inscribed in uniform conduct and normative masculine roles and attributes' (Craik 12-13). In Australia, wearing the cadet uniform elevated the schoolboy to a member of the Australian defence force and he was treated as such (Wise 132). As a symbol of government, the uniform endows the wearer with the authority of that same government (Langner 124).

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the various cadet corps that emerged from Sydney's private schools were formed to fulfil a variety of middle-class priorities. But by the 1900s, rhetoric had shifted to emphasise that the cadets were instilling discipline into boys and preparing youth for the defence of Australia and the British Empire. They were also used as a means to express school pride and identity. The stern militarism surrounding most of the cadet activities allowed the instructors to impress upon cadets values of discipline, duty, and sacrifice and to promote romantic illusions of warfare, and, above all, the idea that war was an adventure. Cadets were also taught that their training was preparation for war. Rifle practice, drill, skirmishes, camps, hiding behind trees and running around hills to attack the enemy from behind, using bushes as cover to sneak up on the enemy (all while in uniform) – these were the tactics of modern warfare. And cadets were left in no doubt that they would become the officers of the nation's defence forces when needed.

Throughout the conduct of all of their activities, the cadet corps *uniform* served as a constant visual reminder of that message. Boys generally wore variations of dark green uniforms with a slouch hat, and at times carried rifles with either blank or live ammunition, depending on their purpose. Some schools used ethnic and cultural traditions and social links in the formation of their cadet corps which was also reflected by varieties in their uniforms. For example, the cadets at Scots College were sponsored by the New South Wales Scottish Rifles (later the 30th Battalion, New South Wales Scottish) and based its uniform on that of the Rifles. It consisted of a slouch hat with a red hackle and blue and gold puggaree, a serge jacket in the Scottish tradition, and kilts from the early 1900s until all uniforms became regulated under Compulsory Military Training in 1911.

From the time a boy put on his cadet uniform to the time he took it off he was treated as part of Australia's defence force, and no longer simply a student at school. The uniform, then, became the prominent visual marker of that shifting role and identity. J. McElhone of St. Joseph's College wrote in the school magazine in March 1911 that 'when we don our uniforms, and are armed with rifles, we shall then commence to take a soldierly pride in ourselves'. While in uniform the boys were expected to act like soldiers, and their instructors (also in uniform) treated them much like soldiers, with high standards of drill, discipline, and order maintained.

Indeed, throughout the 1900s, the cadet corps commanded as much prestige as the rugby and rowing teams. Cleanliness, discipline, and good order during public parades were met with salutations and praise. Success in competitions with other schools in shooting or tug-of-war or other cadet activities was similarly recorded with pride. As with rugby or rowing, the honour of the school was at stake, a matter reflected in Sydney Grammar's ruminations over

the re-formation of its cadet corps in 1907. One of the school's primary concerns was the risk of losing the honour of the school by having an unsuccessful and ill-disciplined company. *The Sydneian* reported in August 1907 that

> if a new S.G.S Cadet Corps should disgrace itself in public by slovenly drill, as it certainly would, if recruited from the "wasters" and little boys, then the Trustees would be blamed for taking a hasty step without gauging the real wishes of boys and parents … . Any New Cadet Corps must maintain the fine traditions of the old one. It must be the pride of the School – our chief object of out-door interest. All sports must give way to it, rather than that the corps, once formed, should fail.

By the early 1900s Newington College and the Kings School both had reputations for the quality and conduct of their cadet corps and it was this reputation that schools such as Sydney Grammar hoped to emulate with the formation of their own cadet corps. The 'wasters' and the 'little boys' were not required. The cadet corps would bring honour to the school, the nation and empire.

The peak expression of this pride came in wearing their uniform for public ceremonies. For example, at St. Ignatius College, the cadet corps served as a funeral cortège for the funeral of a master, Fr. Patrick Keating, in 1913.[2] The Newington cadet corps formed a Guard of Honour for the State Governor, Sir Harry Rawson, in 1905 (*The Newingtonian*, March 1905, 188). As the Guard of Honour the Newington College cadet corps' duties were extended when they were required to fix bayonets in order to keep back the crowd from the main door of Sydney Town Hall where the Governor was inside (*The Newingtonian*, March 1905, 188). Whilst it may seem remarkable to have teenage boys keeping crowds back from the door with rifles with fixed bayonets, in the cadet corps of the 1900s this was expected when the circumstances required; the cadets were not looked upon as immature boys, but rather as responsible and disciplined soldiers, and they were thus treated accordingly. Great crowds lined Sydney's streets to watch the Sydney private school cadet corps parade on special occasions, and, for many youth, being seen in uniform was an exciting and memorable experience. The experience of being one of the estimated eighteen thousand cadets who marched past the Governor-General, Lord Denman, on 30 March 1912 in Centennial Park, with parents, teachers, and government and military officials watching attentively would have been one of great pride (Naughtin 142).

In formation at parades, the cadets were required to be in perfect order, buttons polished and shoes shining, as government and military officials inspected them and their uniforms. Boys without complete uniforms were not allowed to attend, as they would reduce the appearance of the company. Orders were given sharply by officers to fix and unfix bayonets, march in precise line, and perform specific manoeuvres, each carried out by the cadets, it was hoped, in unison. At times, the cadet corps throughout the private schools were addressed by the Inspector-General of the army, the Governor-General of Australia, or by their headmaster, each reminding them the responsibility that each one had to their cadet corps, to their school, and to their king and country. They were told that the many hours of drill required of them was teaching them the 'very valuable and necessary lessons of life' (*The Newingtonian*, December 1911, 171). They were told that to be effective soldiers they needed to be disciplined, do as they were told by their officers, and respond to orders swiftly. Thus, these cadets were learning not only the attributes of an officer, but of middle-class society in

general: respect, presentation, and acceptance of the rules of society.

The cadet corps uniform also helped reinforce notions of duty. Although, prior to 1911, the cadet corps were voluntary, private schools strongly urged all students to join as 'no true Australian can fail to regard it as his duty to fit himself, as far as he is able, to be of service in the case of a call to defend his country' (*The Torch-Bearer*, April 1908, 89). School magazines regularly reported on cadet activities throughout the 1900s and 1910s, including frequent references to the fine appearance. Certainly with boys practicing drill on football fields and outside class windows it must have been difficult for some of those boys who were not cadets not to notice, and be impressed by, the presence of one hundred of their fellow schoolmates carrying their rifles, in military uniform, and in perfect order.

For the students who had joined the cadet corps this sense of duty became paramount. They were inundated with rhetoric praising their dedication to the cadet corps and the sacrifices they made by being a cadet. *The Sydneian* asked cadets to 'consider your Corps first. It is your duty as "Soldiers of the King"' (E.A.W. 19). *The Torch-Bearer* in April 1908 made a similar point:

> Every boy should remember that by becoming an *efficient* cadet he is carrying out a duty which he owes
>
> (1) to his country by rendering himself more capable of fighting in her defence.
>
> (2) to his school by helping to send out a corps that will do her as much credit as cricket and football teams and crews have done in the past.
>
> (3) to himself, by undergoing a training which will benefit him body and soul.[3]

Cadets absorbed this sense of duty, believing that they were honouring their school, their country, and the British Empire. Soldiers of the King they certainly believed they were, at least in the Protestant schools. The boys would be 'toughened by a soldier's hard training and learn to bear the pinch of sacrifice and bear it cheerfully' *(The Torch-Bearer*, April 1911, 251), unlike their peers who had not joined the cadets who were regarded derisively as 'civilians' *(The Torch-Bearer*, October, 1908, 50).

Thus, in an era of growing nationalism and militarism, the cadet corps of the private schools of Sydney grew as a symbol of middle-class values. The most immediate *visual* representation of that symbolism was the cadet corps uniform. When boys put on their uniform, they experienced a change in their demeanour, their identity, and their sense of duty. It had an instant impact on how they saw themselves, and how they were treated by others. These ideas were inculcated into boys throughout their training, and records from across the Sydney private schools suggest that the boys eagerly embraced those lessons. The cadet corps uniform, then, was a valuable tool in the moderation of behaviour and the instillation of core values.

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Notes

[1] For several key examples focussing on this period see Martin Crotty, *Making the Australian*

Male; Thomas W. Tanner, *Compulsory Citizen Soldiers* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co-Operative, 1980); David Jones, 'The Military Use of Australian State Schools: 1872-1914' (Ph.D. Thesis, La Trobe University, 1991); John Barrett, *Falling In – Australians and 'Boy Conscription', 1911-1915* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1979); Nathan Wise, 'Playing Soldiers: Sydney Private School Cadet Corps and the Great War' (*Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 96.2 (2010)); Nathan Wise, 'The Adventurous Cadet: Romanticism and Adventure in the Cadet Corps of the Private Schools of Sydney, 1901-1914' (*Australian Folklore* 29 (2014): 127-141).

[2] St. Ignatius College Archives, photo 'Fr. Patrick Keating's funeral leaving St. Mary's, North Sydney, for Gore Hill Cemetary, 1913'.

[3] *The Torch-Bearer*, Sydney Church of England Grammar School Magazine, Apr. 1908: 90. *The Torch-Bearer* uses the double synonym that the cadet corps were both like a sporting team and a military unit. This supports an argument of D.J. Blair's 'Beyond the Metaphor: Football and War, 1914-1918' in *The Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 28 (Apr. 1996) that sport, particularly team sports such as football, and war were very similar. Sport assisted in the creation of the ideal man, and one best suited for military training, as it enhanced values of 'loyalty, courage, self-discipline, and teamwork' that would be required in war. This argument is further supported by the competitive nature of the cadet corps as examined in chapter four.

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